

MACBITER

As Apple continues its resurgence, boosted by iPod sales and its alliance with Intel, MacBiter wonders why the world's largest ISP still fails to support the Mac for its broadband services

Despite my constant bitching, whining, complaining and other manifestations of dissatisfaction, I wouldn't want you to think this job is without its perks. I have only once been given a complimentary computer, but over the past 20 years I've enjoyed a fair number of other minor freebies. Mainly software, since that doesn't really cost the donor anything, but in the long-ago days when I was on AppleLink I don't remember paying anything (neither did anybody else, which is probably why AppleLink went down), and for years now I've had a similar arrangement with AOL.

There are those of you who affect to consider an AOL address rather downmarket. Like a Sky dish tacked to the pebbledash in front of your house, or a Daewoo car parked outside it, it advertises – so these ISP snobs say – a lack of style. It says 'sink estate' and 'baseball hat on sideways' rather than Cheyne Row and 'Guy Ritchie-style flat cap'.

However, the people who say this to me when I tell them my email address are in danger of confusing me with somebody who gives a f***. I will accept anything from anybody as long as I don't have to pay for it, and over the years AOL, despite my constant and ungrateful bitching, has generously allowed me to use its service without asking me for a bean. A year ago it even upped the favour by making my phone line costs free, too, so now I don't pay anything at all.

LIFE IN THE SLOW LANE

My internet access is also, by comparison with an increasing number of you out there, exceedingly slow. This is because I am still dialling up. Two megabits a second? More like 42 kilobits in my case. Fine for email and general web trawling, but useless for big downloads, webcams and the other toys that come along with high-speed lines. But AOL does broadband, doesn't it? It certainly does, and I've no doubt a number of you are using it. My problem is that, in the UK, AOL doesn't do broadband for the Mac, and it probably never will. So if I want to stay on AOL and get a fast line – and in this context

let me say that AOL has made me no offers of freebies – I have to dump my Macintosh and buy a PC. This is never going to happen.

Forced to choose between totally free dial-up and £15-a-month broadband (plus attendant hassles of switching email addresses), which would you choose? After all, 15 quid is three packets of Piccadilly Filter and... no, it's just not a runner.

What baffles me is why AOL UK has set its face against broadband for the Mac. AOL is the world's largest internet service provider (ISP). I don't know what percentage are still Mac owners, but you have to believe that from now

is kaput. It's only got four per cent of the market. Let's not waste our time." And nobody else daring to disagree, like Hitler's generals when he first explained his plans for Russia. Presumably that was before the iPod had put Apple back on the map as a company; now that the Mac is moving to Intel the entire situation may change and maybe at last the Mac might be moving into sunlit uplands. In which case AOL may come to regret its mistake.

OUT OF TUNE

Already it's produced some amusing discontinuities. When the iTunes Music Store first became a hot property, AOL took the trouble to

has vanished, and AOL is busy promoting a string of broadband-related packages, from 512Kbit/s to 2Mbit/s, and phone calls thrown in.

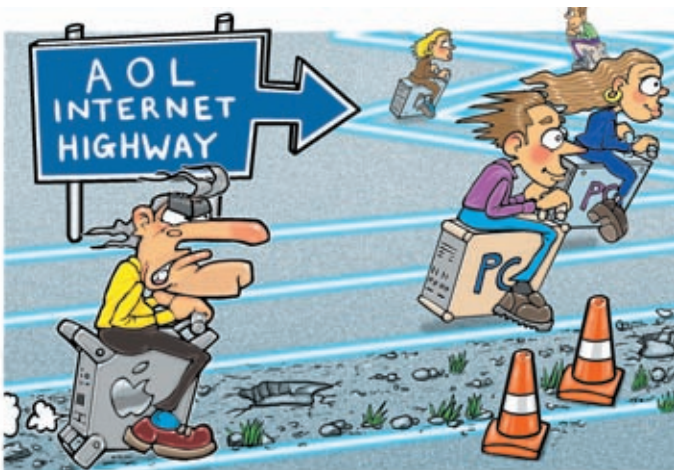
Out of curiosity, I followed this clickable pathway all the way to the point where I was going to have to provide a Visa number. At no point did the site detect that I was using a Mac and steer me away from what would in the end be a big fat let-down for all concerned. Computer says no? The computer says no such thing. It's as if the Mac doesn't exist as far as AOL is concerned.

ABANDON CHIP

If the world's largest chip manufacturer publicly rubs its hands with glee at gaining the business of Apple, to whom it refers as a 'design win', why is the world's largest ISP turning away with a sniff? Small though the Mac market is by comparison with the rest, it's a high-quality platform with lots of movers and shakers preferring the Mac OS to anything else. That is why Microsoft, Quark and Adobe – and many other corporations that may be presumed to know what they're doing – stick to the Mac. To abandon it now seems bizarre.

Until you talk to AOL UK's director of communications, as I did, and discover that not only is the company's Mac user base absurdly tiny, but of those most have not even yet switched to the OS X version of AOL software. This, he says, makes developing a Mac broadband AOL client simply too expensive. Couldn't the American one be localised for the UK? Apparently not. So you're just going to let us walk off into the sunshine? Well, there is another way, but it needs a router and anyway we don't officially support it yet. But you might in the future? Possibly. Then again, possibly not.

So I'm back where I started, no wiser, a little older but – for once – not noticeably poorer. I suppose that's something to be grateful for. 



on these are going to drop off the subscriber list at a rate exactly equivalent to broadband takeup, which incidentally is accelerating. Are there special technical difficulties about the Mac that make even giant corporations think twice before investing in development? None that bothered Tiscali, Demon or even BT. So what is going on?

To oblige a portion of your subscribership to walk away without doing anything to prevent them is so unbusinesslike that you have to wonder if some rather daft decisions have been taken at so senior a level that none of the lowlier people that work at the sharp end – who have to listen to complaints and do their best to answer them – can do anything about changing things.

I can just hear some vice president or other saying, "The Mac

put a special link on its home page. A Mac-using AOL subscriber could, at the click of a mouse, move to ITMS where for less than a quid he could download the iTunes of his choice and thereafter enjoy it on his iPod. Or rather, he couldn't, because it would simply take forever, unless he had broadband, which as a Mac user he wouldn't. So the only AOL customers unable to enjoy the fruits of this Apple site were Apple users, which is probably why the link vanished after a time.

AOL has always been surprisingly bashful about this odd lacuna in its portfolio of services. Until recently, if you clicked a Buy Our Broadband come-on, you would be politely informed via a pop-up that as a Mac user you couldn't have any such product. It didn't say why exactly, but it did tell you. Now this

CONTACT
MACBITER

macbiter@computershopper.co.uk